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STRIKES AS A FACTOR IN PROGRESS.

BY M. E. J. KELLEY.

THE utility, or rather the uselessness, of strikes is a favorite topic of discussion with those whose attention has been called to the extraordinary scale on which these old economic phenomena have recently developed. Whenever, for any reason, workingmen or workingwomen "go on strike," straightway is raised the cry that "wilful waste makes deserved want"; that through their misguided hearkening to the voice of the agitator, they lose wages which no future advance will quite make up. The statistician comes to the front with figures which show just how much the workman is out of pocket by his voluntary idleness, and which prove to the scientist's, if not the workingmen's, satisfaction that, even when the strike is successful from the wage-earners' point of view, the advance in wages is rarely enough to compensate the striker for his loss of earnings, leaving out of consideration the hardships consequent on his idleness.

As comparatively few strikes result in the granting of the workmen's demands, and as the proportion of successful strikes becomes smaller with the more complete organization of employers into associations, leagues, combinations, corporations, and trusts, the questions naturally arise: "Why do working people strike if they know that so little is to be gained? When are strikes beneficial to the workers?"

From the striking workman's point of view, from the vantage ground of the trades-unionist, all strikes are beneficial to the working people whether they succeed or fail.

It is something after this fashion that the trades-unionist thinks and talks about the matter: Most people look at strikes in a much too fore-shortened sort of way. It is like looking at the houses across the street and regarding them as dull walls of brick

or stone, which shut out our view and our air. When we look beyond the walls we see the homes, and a little thinking convinces us that these houses, with our house and others, go to make up the city. They are the result of the advance of civilization and necessary to its further progress. So it is with strikes. Take a great railroad strike, for instance. People are apt to think of it as hindering them from getting about their affairs. Closer investigation shows that it, too, is a necessary part of civilization. Strikes are checks which prevent civilization from going to smash through the brutalization of the masses. They are like the torpedoes the switchmen place on the tracks to warn the engineer of approaching trains to slow up, for there is danger ahead. Perhaps you have lain awake at night and listened to the low rumble of a heavily-laden freight train coming nearer and nearer. Suddenly you hear two quick sharp reports. The rumble grows fainter, then ceases, and you know the engineer has stopped and got down to consult the man in the switch tower.

And that is just what the engineers of society do. They get down and look about for the trouble. They investigate the motives and methods of employers, and seek for results on their employees. If the explosions are numerous enough they set about finding remedies for the grievances which have led to such persistent alarms.

That is one reason why all strikes are beneficial to working people ; because they set people thinking about the conditions of the workers. A strike is always beneficial in the long run because it interests in the dynamic labor movement a great many persons who would never think of conditions, or their relation to civilization generally, if it were not for some violent disturbance. And the more people are interested, the sooner the strike phase of the development of the labor movement will give way to something less violent.

It is this profound conviction that in the long run strikes are a success, even when they fail, which impels clear-headed leaders of organizations to advocate the most determined fighting even when it is apparent to every one that the point contested must inevitably be lost. They believe implicitly that all the improvements which have been brought about in labor's condition, all the factory laws and boards of arbitration and conciliation, bureaus of statistics, are due indirectly to strikes.

Even when strikes seem most absurd, and look to the casual observer like the most dismal sort of failures, they are often of the greatest benefit. There was the great railroad strike of 1894 at Chicago, which so many condemned, and which to most outsiders looked like a disastrous failure. No trades-unionist looks upon it as anything but a most glorious event in the history of labor insurrections. Eugene Debs, who was sent to prison for violating a sweeping injunction, is thought to have done more for labor's cause than any one person has accomplished since the days of Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison.

The railroad companies were not the first employers to secure injunctions which tied the strikers, who desired to obey their country's laws, hand and foot, and even deprived them of the right of free speech. But never before had the injustice and the evil of such a course been brought so forcibly to the country's notice. The echo of the indignation of the time may be heard in the political platform of one of the old parties in the recent Presidential campaign. The Chicago strike did more to show the people generally the tremendous power of the railroads, and how utterly dependent on them is our economic and social life; it interested more of the educated class, and did more towards making possible the governmental control of the railroads, than a quarter of a century of agitation could have accomplished.

The strike of the six thousand motormen and conductors employed on the trolley cars of Brooklyn may be cited as another example of the strike which seems, from the foreshortened point of view, a disaster, and from the trade-unionists' standpoint, a success. Thousands of people now regard municipal control of public franchises as desirable where a dozen gave the matter a thought before the strike, and this, in the end, must be a benefit to the workers in general because it will mean reduced fares and better service, as well as better treatment for employees. The interest aroused by the strike in the condition of men employed by the street car companies has led to the drafting of a bill which will be presented to the next Legislature, and which provides that all bodies holding public franchises shall establish joint boards of conciliation and arbitration with their employees for the purpose of settling all disputes. Provision is made for the selection of a referee whose decision shall be final in case the members of the board cannot come to an agreement.

The strike of the cigarmakers at Binghamton, N. Y.—a strike which involved three thousand young men and women, which lasted three months and ended in disastrous failure for the workers immediately involved—was a direct benefit to the strikers in Brooklyn five years later. The strike at Binghamton in 1890 was broken up by means of injunctions which restrained the leaders from making addresses to the strikers, from writing articles for the newspapers, from soliciting aid, from picketing shops. The Cigarmakers' Union carried the suits on which the injunctions were based to the higher courts, and four years later a decision was handed down that in New York State workmen are on the same footing as business men. Their labor is a commodity and they have the same right to persuade others to join with them in protecting their own interests by keeping up the price of the commodity they have for sale that merchants possess. They have the right to persuade others to leave their employers, provided they do not use violence, and they have the right to picket shops. In short, all the methods which a merchant may use to protect his business and to persuade his competitors not to undersell or otherwise injure him are legitimate for the labor seller. While this view of labor as a commodity, like other wares, may not be in accord with the opinions of the most enlightened school of economists, this decision of the highest court of New York, sitting at Syracuse, in the fall of 1894, was of great importance to the Brooklyn strikers. Injunctions could not tie the hands and tongues of the leaders of the motormen as they did the cigarmakers' strike committee. The Binghamton strike was a great success for the working people as a whole, although it was a miserable failure for the cigarmakers involved.

Less easily pointed out are the benefits which result from strikes in the way of prevention of reductions of wages or of the imposition of harder conditions. The greedy employer who will stop at nothing, no matter what its effect upon the workmen, so long as it enables him to undersell his competitors, will hesitate a long time before he will reduce wages if he has had one experience with a long and bitter strike. It is a maxim among the workmen advocates of boards of conciliation and mediation that such boards are never successful until both sides are thoroughly tired of fighting. The employer will only consent to settle

peaceably all future differences after he has been thoroughly whipped, or at any rate made to take a leading part in a long and expensive strike. And it is a fact that the most successful joint boards of conciliation are in operation in those trades which have been characterized by the fiercest fighting. In Belgium and in England the mine owners and their employees only came together to settle matters peaceably after long and bitter strikes. The same thing is true of the building trades in New York, which have not had a strike for twelve years, and all of whose difficulties are now settled by a duly elected joint board in which the Workmen's Union and Employers' Association are equally represented.

More obvious are the benefits of strikes which succeed than the helpfulness of those which fail. Very often, however, their real benefit is overlooked. Usually the increase of wages or the prevention of a reduction is only the surface indication; the real benefit strikes deeper roots into the social body. The strikes of the garment workers are evidence of the superficial view which the great public takes of strikes. Not one person in a hundred of those who have read of the bitter struggle of those half-starved foreigners has any notion of the significance of the struggle. Only the few who have made a study of the sweatshop system have a realizing sense of the good which the garment workers' strike has accomplished not only for the workmen involved, but for every one who ever wears a ready-made garment. If people did understand, the secretary of the Garment Workers' Union would be snowed under the avalanche of letters and resolutions of thanks.

The conditions under which ready-made clothing was manufactured in all the great cities, but particularly in New York, prior to the series of strikes inaugurated three or four years ago, was atrocious. The workshops were merely tenement-rooms, insufficiently ventilated, badly lighted, terribly crowded. Dirty beyond description, and entirely without any decent sanitary arrangements, men, women, and children worked, ate, and slept in them. Very often the only beds were the piles of half-finished clothing. Scarlet fever, diphtheria, and measles were two hundred per cent. more frequent in the sweatshop districts of New York than anywhere else, and children ill of these diseases lay on the heaps of garments which were afterwards taken back to

the retail shops and scattered far and wide. Rarely was any method of disinfecting the garments thought of, or any attempt made to prevent contagion. The hours of labor were outrageous, Children four years old, even, were found pulling basting threads twelve hours a day.

Time and again the public was harrowed by the story. The United States Senate appointed a committee of its members to investigate. It did so and reported itself duly horrified, but no improvement resulted. The Legislature of New York did likewise and the sweatshop system continued to flourish. Anti-sweatshop leagues, composed of philanthropic and influential people, were organized. Apparently no one dreamt that the workers themselves might solve the vexing problem by the very simple method of refusing to work under such conditions. Ignorant of the language and customs of the country, most of them Russian Hebrews, immigrants, they seemed helpless indeed. Gradually the leaven of discontent worked among the New York sweatshop toilers. The immigrant aspired to the level of the native worker. Leaders sprang up from among their ranks. Three years ago they inaugurated a series of strikes. First, they struck against the "task" system, which was at the basis of the terribly long hours. They had been required to finish a certain number of garments as a day's work, instead of working a stipulated number of hours. They were willing to work ten hours a day, they declared. Public sentiment was with them, and they won their strike. Emboldened by success, and by the fact that a law had been passed regulating the manufacture of clothing in tenement-houses, and giving special powers over the sweatshops to the factory inspectors, they struck again. They demanded that the wholesale dealer give the cut garments only to contractors who would have them made up in shops conforming to the factory laws. Their demands were granted, with the result that the sweatshop system, if not entirely wiped out, has received a very severe blow. The workers themselves, by their own united efforts, and by using that much-abused weapon the strike, have accomplished what apparently far more influential outsiders were unable to do. The garment workers all over the country followed the example of their New York brethren of the National Garment Workers' Union, and in most cases succeeded in materially improving conditions.

The garment workers' strikes are particularly interesting not only because they show the power of the workers when they realize that power and work together, but because they demonstrate the quickness with which the immigrant rises to the new level instead of dragging down the American workman to his old-world standard. The garment workers' strikes are also illustrative of the change in methods of strikes which has been brought about by changed methods of employers. The later-day strike to be successful must be on an immense scale. The old idea of the workmen was to strike in one shop at a time, but they have been obliged to change their methods since employers have formed combinations and in such a case supply the orders of the shop in which the workmen have struck instead of trying to get the unfortunate employer's customers for themselves, as they would under the old order of competition. The modern strike to have any chance of success must be on a large scale. The workmen must be well organized and disciplined. The chances of winning are increased by having a paid leader whose business it is to devote his whole time to the management of the collective affairs of the workmen.

From the trades-unionist point of view, then, all strikes are beneficial to working people in the long run. Some strikes are beneficial to those who strike as well as to the workers generally. A strike may be a benefit to people who never heard of it. This pre-supposes, of course, a wrong of some sort back of the strike. Strikes which have not a principle of justice behind them are very rare nowadays. In the earlier stages of the labor movement it is quite possible that feverish, childish, ill-considered strikes were entered into without sufficient cause. Mr. Oscar Cole, a prominent member of the New York Bricklayers' Union, and a member of the New York Council of Mediation and Conciliation, remarked recently that twenty years ago, whenever the slightest dispute arose, the bricklayers threw down their trowels, pulled off their overalls and quit. Nowadays they do things quite differently. The bricklayers of New York have not struck in twelve years, yet they are receiving a third more pay and working two hours a day less than before the era of peace set in. Their employers, too, consider themselves better off, though they pay nearly twice the old scale of wages, because of the certainty of not having their contracts delayed by strikes, and because of the

higher grade of intelligence and the greater sense of responsibility which have been developed. But even these benefits may be traced to those early strikes which caused people to inquire into their difficulties, and to suggest a better way of settling disputes. When both sides were tired of the constant fighting they listened to the suggestion of an outsider, Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell, that they should organize a joint board of conciliation and arbitration. Both sides are represented, and all disputes are settled by the joint committee. This is one of the greatest benefits of strikes, that they ultimately lead to better ways of settling labor disputes, and there seems no other way of reaching this peace except through war.

The labor movement is simply the struggle upward to the light of the wage-earning class ; the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat, the Socialists call it. All emancipating movements have begun in insurrections. Strikes are the insurrections of labor. There has come, in all emancipating movements, the taking up of the cause by disinterested outsiders. This, too, has happened to labor. It marks the step beyond the strike stage of the labor agitation, and that, too, is one of the benefits of strikes. Strikes mean progress.

M. E. J. KELLEY.